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A Magnificent Catastrophe, The Tumultuous Election of 1800, by
Edward J. Larson, Free Press, 2007

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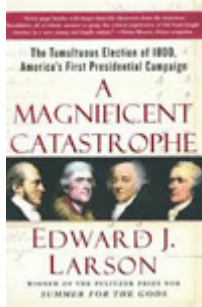
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Recommended Readings



A Magnificent Catastrophe, The Tumultuous Election of 1800

by Edward J. Larson, Free Press, 2007

Reviewed by George Geib

Bitterly contested Presidential elections are almost as old as the American republic. Edward Larson builds a strong case that the John Adams -Thomas Jefferson contest of 1800 introduced many of the features that we now take for granted in national campaigns. The contestants were two leading members of the political elite, each possessed of an impressive resume. Once close friends, they had fallen out over the constitutional meaning of the federal balance, over such economic issues as banks and taxes, and over the best policies to protect a vulnerable America from the great powers of their time. Underlying the struggle were deep social issues reflecting the differing meanings of democracy in North and South. Internal factional struggles for party control, especially the maddening attempts of Alexander Hamilton to exploit an undeclared war with France, add texture and complexity. The author traces the emergence of a nominating process, shows the rise of position papers and a highly partisan press, watches party managers target doubtful electoral votes, and even identifies the first October surprise. It's all so far back in time, and yet it all sounds so very modern.

- George Geib is Professor of History at Butler University.